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# Artistic Healing

BY KATHY LATOUR

Antonia Perez steps quietly into the hospital room, asking the man lying still in the bed if he wants “to do some art.” The man quickly replies, “No,” but Perez isn’t deterred. Resting her bucket of paint brushes, colored pens, and pencils on the ubiquitous rolling bedside table, she says, “You look really bored. Why don’t you try this and have some fun?” The man says he doesn’t know how, and Perez jumps on the frequent response. “You don’t have to. I’ll show you.”

In addition to drawing and painting materials, Perez carries scissors, glue, card-making supplies, frames, and other art materials. For the next hour, she stands beside the table where the patient, now totally involved in a watercolor and oil pastel painting, works diligently on his piece.

As the man carefully chooses his next color and brush, Perez listens actively and responds to whatever the man asks. By the time he has finished, Perez has become a friend and they chat about New York and the symbols the man sees in his art. As she gathers up her supplies, Perez tells him she will be back when his art is dry to mount it on the wall. “Thank you,” he tells her, taking her hands in his. “That was fun.”

Perez is one of 18 Artists-in-Residence, or AIRs, at The Creative Center: Arts in Healthcare, a community of artists, patients, and survivors in New York City dedicated to bringing creative arts to people living with cancer and other chronic illnesses through its free-of-charge AIR program and workshops, which are funded through corporate sponsorships, grants, and donations. It represents a growing number of programs across the country, where those with cancer and other diseases can express themselves while spending an hour or two distracted from the pain or boredom of disease.

Like all AIRs, Perez is a professional artist who was hired by the center and received training to work with patients, their families, and staff at Bellevue Hospital Center. As an AIR, two days a week she takes her bucket of art supplies to private rooms, the chemotherapy infusion room, and the outpatient waiting room. In addition, she does workshops for the nurses and staff a few times a year. She spends hours each week logging her activities and impressions for the center.

The artists range from visual artists and dancers, to writers and studio artists. The visual artists work in hospitals, hospices, and other health care settings, in addition to teaching classes at the center, which is located in lower Manhattan. Free art classes—with titles such as Drawing from the Model, The Moving Pen, West Africa Fusion, Storytelling, and The Expressive Body—bring together the newly diagnosed and the long-term survivor to dance, craft, sculpt, photograph, and write.

The center's goal is to provide cancer survivors an opportunity to discover their own creative resources as they meet the challenges of their illnesses and treatment, says center executive director Robin Glazer, a breast cancer survivor and artist who started out as a volunteer and became the director in 2006. Glazer says it's important to understand that healing art is not art therapy, but a way to help patients see beyond their illness as whole, creative individuals. "We differ from art therapists since they are a part of the medical team," she explains. "The information the therapist gleans through the expressive arts is used to help develop a treatment plan."

But illness is not the point of the workshops, Glazer says. "You might have a newly diagnosed patient sitting next to someone who had cancer 30 years ago, and therein lies the support. If you are sitting next to the person who has colon cancer and you also have it and they are still here, that feels pretty good."

Started in 1994 by Geraldine Herbert, a former social worker at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, and Adrienne Assail, an attorney who has since died of breast cancer, The Creative Center has grown to offer its services throughout the New York area to more than 15,000 people a year who have struggled with illness, most of whom are cancer patients or long-term survivors, in addition to health care staff and caregivers.

In addition to on-site workshops and the traveling AIRs, The Creative Center represents artists—professional or not—living with illness by compiling their work in a registry. The center also compiles images from AIRs, workshop teachers, and participants for corporate and private collectors who can buy originals and rights to reproduce. Visitors to [www.thecreativecenterarts.org](http://www.thecreativecenterarts.org) can buy notecards of photographs taken by workshop participants, and art exhibits offer an opportunity for sales.